

## *Introduction to Elkins*

### Murray Bookchin

The New Left had the decency to fold up its tents when it became hopelessly entrapped in sectarian forms of Marxism toward the end of the 1960s. This, alas, has not been the case with many of the “new social movements” that surfaced in the 1970s. Today, much that passes for feminism, cultural innovation, neo-Marxism, and a pop-anarchism verging on nihilism has found an exotic life in the academy under the rubric of postmodernism. Far from taking a radical turn, many of these movements have simply been integrated into the system.

One area, however, remains embattled and some sectors within it still resist commercialization and adaptation to the *status quo*: the ecology movement. Clearly, co-optation is more often the rule than the exception. Most of the European Greens have become electoral parties barely distinguishable from their liberal cousins. To “green” anything, be it ice cream or an oil tanker, has become a cliché, as witness Britain’s new “green” prime minister and her counterparts in Washington, Paris, and Bonn. Nevertheless, the ecological crisis exhibits a persistence that cannot be readily exorcised by the media and political rhetoric. The moonscapes produced by acid rain and worldwide deforestation, not to speak of the putrid air and water to which most urban populations are exposed, are too real to be ignored. The urgency of the crisis brought about by ecological devastation give Stephan Elkins’ “The Politics of Mystical Ecology” immediate political relevance. Although he focuses on one work, Fritjof Capra’s *The Turning Point*, and seems to be only partially familiar with the “deep” versus “social ecology” clash that has reverberated through the American

ecology movements, he provides a valuable critical survey of the mentality that has given rise to this dispute.

Capra's work, which has enjoyed enormous success in the US and abroad, has not only provided the garnish for reactionary tendencies in what remains of the "new social movements," in many respects it is the voice for an anti-rational, mystical atavism that has become embedded in pop Western ideology. There is a chilling similarity between the cultural decay that passes for postmodernism today, and its antecedents in the dying ancient world. In both eras, a strident public life seems to have given way to an oppressive sense of powerlessness, followed by a retreat into privatism — all of which culminates in an obsession with personal redemption and mystical union. The ancient world faced this *cul de sac* in a grand fashion. The modern world faces its own *cul de sac* in a mindless eclecticism. Hence the growing market for works on "Paleolithic" religions, homespun recipes on bucolic contentment, a staggering array of mystical cults stressing "cosmic oneness" and "12-step" programs toward egoistic self-indulgence. A recent "alternative" catalogue of wares conducive of union with the cosmos offers a "Gaia Pocket Goddess" which provides the thrill of "thirty thousand years of Earth wisdom in this power image of the Ancestral Goddess." Purchasers can have "Her" for only \$15.00. Should they need a quick psychic fix, they can "touch her" and feel a sense of renewal. Or there is the "Dancing Goddess Nightshirt" to "lighten your heart and deepen your sleep!" — the exclamation mark goes with the ad — at only \$20.00 a throw. Apparently She dances "with the moon" and offers an ecstatic journey "into dreamtime," presumably in lieu of valium.

The mystics of the past studied ideas as assiduous recluses and tried to feed an intellectual passion for coherence. The mystics of today sell their wares in a feverish marketplace and thrive on an appetite for incoherence that goes under the name of "pluralism" or a degraded form of "unity in diversity." It is here that the commodity, as distinguished from intellectual continuity, makes all the difference: the consumerist maxim that a new product will cure one's spiritual ills, be it a BMW or pap on paper, accounts for the persisting fashionability of Capra's "new paradigm," as it is often called. In any case, whatever "mystical union" it has produced is exemplified by the modern substitute for the ancient agora: the shopping mall.

What is striking about this kind of "mystical union" — be it with Earth goddesses or BMWs — is its ideological volatility. Ideas, however cloaked as sentiments, come and go like the popularity of TV programs.

The liberal — even “socialist” — word for this brainless flux of titulating items is “pluralism.” To suggest a coherent outlook, a measure of intellectual consistency, a distinct logic, one risks damnation as an “elitist” or “old paradigm” rationalist. This kind of studied incoherence with its medley of utterly contradictory ideas characterizes every page of Capra’s book. The author’s acknowledgments read like the contents of his book: his various ideological debts range from such creditors as Marcuse and Angela Davis to R.D. Laing and the “Esalen community.” Presumably this safety net is meant to spare the book from the withering critique it deserves.

What is important is that Capra’s “new paradigm,” with its hash of contradictory ideas, is not simply a product of co-optation; it is an active factor in *producing* cooptation. By avowing its support of “deep ecology” — essentially a mere wilderness cult — on the basis of “an intuitive awareness of the oneness of all life,” the book skirts the need for critical analysis and distinguishes opponent from supporter and religion from rationality.

Not accidentally, this kind of pap has nourished some of the most quiescent tendencies in the ecology movement. One can read Capraesque formulas and “deep ecology” recipes in the Canadian Green Party’s claim that it stands for “cooperation” as against “confrontation.” One would expect the antonym to be *competition*, not confrontation. But New Age mystics and “deep ecology” acolytes do not “confront,” be it the corporate establishment, bourgeois social relations, or the omnipresent State. The implicit notion that it is not competition that is the source of ecological ills but rather “confrontation” — this, in a world that has already been rendered passive-receptive to the point of self-oblivion — is evidence of a ubiquitous “Oneness” with a vengeance. Translated from mystical formulas into real social life, it is an enervating balm that brings corporate managers into “connectedness” with New Age environmentalists, Margaret Thatchers with deep ecologists, and Donald Trumps with dreamy mystics. That Capra and his followers have openly praised corporations for assimilating an ecological mentality by appointing environmental scientists to their boards of directors and for taking token measures to reduce pollutants is compelling evidence of how “new paradigm” thinking serves as an apology for the *status quo*.

The demise of the traditional socialisms has left a vacuum in modern thinking that will not be filled by the reworked formulas of proletarian insurgency and class struggle that became exhausted before WWII.

Nor will the failure of the Enlightenment to go beyond instrumental rationalism be remedied by a hodge-podge theory of “communicative action.” Political, economic, and social disempowerment go hand-in-hand with ideological disempowerment — hence the popularity of “new paradigm” thinking in our own time. New Age mysticism, anti-rationalism, and “Earth Goddess” religiosity contribute to legitimating today’s social and political vacuum. They have made vacuity a virtue in the culture of our times. Post-modernism and its “lit-crit” literature have provided the vulgarities of New Age mysticism with an academic stamp of approval. To be vacuous has thus become a credo, reinforced by “12-step” programs for the alienated and Earth Goddess amulets for the dispirited. This occurs at a time when organic forms of reason have never been more needed.

Capitalism may have restabilized itself much more than anyone could have expected, but it has destabilized its relation with the natural world to an even greater extent. This places present society and mystical ecology at odds with reality. Hence, much as they may seem to be assimilated by society at any given time, the ecological crises must remain a source of social turbulence, irrespective of Capra’s sedatives and deep ecology’s biocentric mysticism.

It is not accidental that whatever radicalism exists today is permeated by the values of social ecology — a body of ideas predicated on the notion that the domination of nature stems from the domination of human by human. No goddess amulets can provide a substitute for this compelling tendency and the need of a society free of domination as such. No Green movement can ignore these imperatives, however much it seeks the balm of mystical conciliation and “connectedness” with its most predatory opponents. Capra’s and his admirers’ commitment to mere lifestyle changes, “convivial” enterprises that quickly turn into boutiques, and entrepreneurial “justice” — to use the burgeoning lingo of eco-capitalism — inexorably run up against the need for basic institutional change. Such a change must involve a new politics based on grassroots municipal democracy as distinguished from the centralized state, and confederalism as distinguished from nationalism. If the ecological notion of “unity in diversity” is to mean something more than “cooperation” as distinguished from confrontation, it must entail ideological coherence, a sense of purpose, a social goal including a rational society and an organic rationality. Finally, its “pluralism” must provide the basis for rational dialogue, not chronic confusion or, worse, “mystical union.”

The Green and ecological movements are not likely to be “happy” places in which to function. They must live in stormy seas of dispute. To invoke the hollow cry of “sectarianism” and “dogmatism” in order to legitimate intellectual chaos, programmatic contradictions, and illogicality is only a smokescreen. If what goes under the name of “eco-feminism” seems to be settling into a deadening Earth Goddess religiosity and if what passes for neo-Marxism is little more than a tempest in an academic teacup, then the ecology movement holds a much richer promise for the future. It cannot be frittered away in mystical nostrums. A society based on growth, capital accumulation, mindless production and consumption, and privatism cannot live with climatic upheavals, a poisoned planet, and a degree of ecological simplification that is incompatible with the existence of complex life-forms. If this society and its mystical trappings must eventually lead to major social confrontations, it is because it stands in flat ecological contradiction with the very existence of the biosphere. Capra’s sedatives offer no solution to these problems. Indeed, they give it a dreamlike unreality that Elkins’ work helps to dispatch.

